

From The Morning Call

Extra dam releases to bring in \$34 million more
Carbon businesses to benefit from 22 dates of rapids along Lehigh.

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Carbon County businesses will see a \$34 million jump in revenue this year because of increased water releases from Francis E. Walter Dam in Kidder Township, recreation and tourism officials said Wednesday.

There will be 15 more water releases this year, for a total of 22 days when the water level will stay higher and the rapids will be more enticing.

Rafting company owners and officials from the county and Pocono Mountains Vacation Bureau gathered at Asa Packer Park in Jim Thorpe to announce the expected financial impact of the releases.

"They fall during the time of the year when people actually want to get wet," said Ken Powley, owner of Whitewater Challengers of White Haven. "We're looking forward to some really great weekends."

The extra water releases are expected to increase rafting, kayaking and boating business along the Lehigh Gorge, a popular rafting area between White Haven and Jim Thorpe.

Last year, water was released seven times.

The release schedule is part of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' work with the state Fish and Boat Commission, the state Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, and the Delaware River Basin Commission to increase recreation on the Lehigh River.

The Army Corps owns and operates the 44-year-old flood-control dam.

The Army Corps plans to raise the reservoir level 35 feet from May through October, tripling the reservoir's surface from 80 acres to 240 acres and quadrupling its volume from 580 million gallons to 2,340 million gallons.

The access road at the dam gets washed out when heavy rain increases the depth of the body of water to more than 1,310 feet.

The Army Corps is installing a new access road at a higher elevation to let visitors access the lake when the water depth is increased to 1,335 feet. A greater depth also is likely to increase fish populations.

Powley and other area rafting company owners lobbied the state and federal agencies to increase the river's flow during warmer months.

Higher flow also increases depth downstream, making for more adventurous whitewater rafting, and better boating and fishing.

That, in turn, will increase business countywide, officials said.

"In our business, attractions and outdoor activity is a mainstay of what we promote and what draws people throughout the region," said Bob Uguccione, director of the vacation bureau. "I just think it's a win-win for everybody."

Each of the 22 release dates is expected to bring the county \$2.28 million in revenue, for a total economic gain of \$50.1 million this year.

An estimated 6,200 rafters and boaters travel down the Lehigh each release day, benefiting bed-and-breakfasts, hotels, restaurants, gas stations and shops, officials said.

Michael Heery, president of the Jim Thorpe Council of the Carbon County Chamber of Commerce, lauded the program as an economic boost.

"Business all over Carbon County certainly will benefit, but mostly here in Jim Thorpe," he said.

In addition to promoting rafting, the releases will improve fishing because the more water that goes down the river, the cooler the water temperature, making for healthier trout and other fish.

"It's really good for the whole area and everything that's tourist related," said Paul Fogal, co-owner of Pocono Whitewater of Penn Forest Township.

The Corps' plan calls for releasing 750 cubic feet to 1,000 cubic feet of water per second on May 14-15 and 28-29; June 11-12 and 25-26; July 2-3 and 23-24; Aug. 6-7 and 20-21; Sept. 3-4 and 17-18; and Oct. 1-2.

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